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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated special educators' and special education administrators' perceptions of special education within Portugal. Using a 4-point Likert scale, a 15-item questionnaire written in Portuguese was given to 106 participants attending inservice training in Benavente and Seixal, Portugal. Items dealt with attitudes, money, support, curriculum, and preparation. The same questionnaire was given to 107 special educators and administrators from West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Results from the questionnaires indicate that the Portuguese administrators' attitudes, teachers' attitudes, development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), classroom management, and implementation of the IEP were rated highest, although all were within the "fair" categorical range. The lowest Portuguese scores were for monetary support, number of related services, number of classroom aides, community support, and number of special education teachers tied with teacher preparation. Similar findings were identified within the United States sample. Classroom management, development of the IEP, implementation of the IEP, and teachers' attitudes were the highest scores. Low scores were number of teacher aides, community support, monetary support, number of special education teachers, and number of related services. Samples differed on teacher preparation, with the United States respondents viewing this as a strength and the Portuguese respondents as a weakness. (CR)

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Assessing Special Education in Portugal and the United States: A Comparative Study

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Assessing Special Education in Portugal and the United States: A Comparative Study

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A study comparing the perceptions of educators and administrators regarding special education was conducted in Portugal and the United States. Results indicated that although the United States participants had generally higher ratings in 14 of the 15 categories assessed, relative strengths and weaknesses noted from both countries were very similar. Implications are provided.

A report from the World Conference on Special Needs, held in Salamanca, Spain in 1994 affirmed the principle of education for all with specific recognition of the concept of inclusion (Lombardi and Ludlow, 1996). Representative from 92 countries and 265 international organizations encouraged collaborative efforts by general educators and special educators in meeting the needs of students at risk for failure, as well as students who have been identified as having special education needs. Even the People's Republic of China, in which educators stress group instruction as opposed to individualized instruction, has witnessed growth in special education over the past 15 years (Li and Altman, 1997). The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (1996) study of 10 European countries describes each country's legislation, facts and figures on children with special needs, overall organization, types of provisions and future trends. One of the trends noted is to assess not only the quantity but also the quality of special education in their respective countries. The Council for Exceptional Children recently released its study about special education teaching in the United States at a press conference on October 23, 2000 (CEC, 2000). Some of the obstacles to quality special education practices included overwhelming paper work, high caseloads, lack of time for individualized instruction, lack of resources, and lack of qualified special educators.

As part of a Fulbright teaching/research experience in Portugal, Drs. Tom and Estelle Lombardi conducted a survey of special educators' and special education administrators' perceptions of special education within their country. Stimulation to conduct the study was provided by two overview articles on special education (daFonseca, 1996; Lombardi, 1999).) Using a 4 point Likert scale, a 15 item questionnaire written in Portuguese (see English translation in Table 1) was given to 106 participants attending inservice training in Benavente and Seixal, Portugal. Items dealt with attitude, money, support, curriculum, and preparation. Upon return to the United States

in the Fall, 2000, the same questionnaire was given to 107 special educators and administrators from West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. The majority of participants were from West Virginia attending a special education conference, classes at West Virginia University, and inservice training sessions. However approximately 20% were from the neighboring states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

Results

A tally of the 106 Portuguese participant scores, in order, indicate that the administrators' attitude, teachers' attitude, development of the IEP, classroom management, and implementation of the IEP were rated highest although all were within the "fair" categorical range (see Table II). The lowest Portuguese scores were: monetary support, number of related services, number of classroom aides, community support, and number of special education teachers tied with teacher preparation. All of these scores were in the "poor" category. Interestingly, very similar findings were identified when tallying the 107 scores provided by the United States sample. Classroom management, development of the IEP, implementation of the IEP, and teachers' attitude were the highest scores in sequential order. The only difference was the substitute of teacher preparation (United States) for administrators' attitude (Portugal) which was the third highest score. It should be noted the first three of the five areas were rated in the "good" category. Low scores were number of teacher aides, community support, monetary support, number of special education teachers, and number of related services. With the exception of teacher preparation, these were the same five categories as those cited by the Portuguese special educators and administrators. Only one of the categories (teacher aides) was listed in the "poor "category, all others were in the "fair" category.
It would appear that although overall educators and administrators sampled in the United States feel somewhat more positive about special education than their Portuguese counterparts, none of the categories assessed achieved an "excellent rating". In fact only three categories received a "good" rating, eleven received a "fair rating" and one received a "poor" rating. Relative to the Portuguese, nine categories had "fair" ratings, and the other six had "poor" ratings.

Implications

Although thousands of miles apart and with different laws, educators and administrators from Portugal and the United States perceived very similar strengths and weaknesses in their special education programs. One major difference seems to be in terms of teacher preparation where the United States respondents viewed this as a strength; Portuguese as a weakness. Preparing teachers for special education certification has been available in the United States for a longer period of time. Results from both countries seem to indicate that respondants feel they are doing a

good job in what they can control; however supports in terms of numbers and kind needed are lacking. Unlike ther United States, there are no extra funds for special education in Portugal. Each school based upon enrollment, is allocated funds to operate that school. Inclusion, whether responsible or not, is assumed for most students with special education needs. Almost all the special education teachers function as consultants with fairly large case loads.

It may well be that the concerns for both quantity and quality in special education programming can best be corrected by an international agenda champion by groups such as the International Association of Special Education. Special education continues to be a world concern.

Table 1

Survey of special education professionals

Please rank the following by circling the corresponding number according to your perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the special education in Portugal (United States).

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1. Development of the IEP	4	3	2	1
2. Implementation of the IEP	4	3	2	1
3. Teachers' attitude	4	3	2	1
4. Administrators' attitude	4	3	2	1
5. Monetary support	4	3	2	1
6. Parent support	4	3	2	1
7. Community support (business, etc.)	4	3	2	1
8. Teacher preparation	4	3	2	1
9. Classroom management	4	3	2	1
10. Individual student management	4	3	2	1
11. Curriculum modifications	4	3	2	1
12. Lesson modifications	4	3	2	1
13. Number of related services	4	3	2	1
14. Number of sp. ed. teachers	4	3	2	1
15. Number of classroom aides (helpers)	4	3	2	1

Table 2

SURVEY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

Perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the special education programs in the United States and Portugal.

Ranking: 4=Excellent, 3=Good, 2=Fair, 1=Poor

	United States (n=107)	Portugal(n=106)
1. Development of the IEP	2.96*	2.56*
2. Implementation of the IEP	2.84*	2.38*
3. Teachers' attitude	2.68	2.66*
4. Administrators' attitude	2.57	2.68*
5. Monetary support	2.13**	1.20**
6. Parent support	2.26**	1.80**
7. Community support	2.11**	1.47**
8. Teacher preparation	2.94*	2.06
9. Classroom management	3.04*	2.39*
10. Individual management	2.73*	2.23
11. Curricular modifications	2.63	2.11
12. Lesson modifications	2.61	2.15
13. Number of related services	2.42	1.30**
14. Number of sp. ed. teachers	2.28**	1.80**
15. Number of classroom aides	2.02**	1.31**

* Highest scores

** Lowest scores

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* This paper has not been published. It follows the presentation my wife and I will be presenting at the 2002 CEC Convention in New York City. Both paper and my oral report are the product of my Fulbright Research/Teaching Award presented by the U.S. Education Program. My visit to Portugal was in the Spring of 2000.